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San Clemente Fifty-two Years Ago August, 1888

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*Photo by Don Hill, 1939*

HONORABLE FRANK T. CHEETHAM, PAST PRESIDENT OF THE NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL SOCIETY, PRESENTING HIS PAPER, "SAN CLEMENTE—FIFTY-TWO YEARS AGO" TO THE EDITOR OF THE QUARTERLY IN FRONT OF HIS OFFICE IN TAOS. THE ADOBE BUILDING IS MORE THAN A HUNDRED YEARS OLD

# *San Clemente*

## *Fifty-two Years Ago*

August, 1888



By FRANCIS T. CHEETHAM

THE words of my mother were: "Frank, you are too late; the ship has sailed." She knew that I had hurried down from Santa Ana to our camp at Laguna Beach, to ship as cabin boy on the yacht "San Diego."

This was in the month of August, 1888, and the yacht, under the command of Captain Peterson, was sailing for the Island of San Clemente. It was a two-masted schooner of about thirty tons burden. It was about 85 feet from stern to bowsprit and about 25 foot beam. Capt. Peterson was taking a small party of men to visit and explore the least known of the "Channel Islands." He had asked me to join the party as cabin boy and anyone may know the feeling of disappointment when I heard my mother's words.

I was not disposed, however, to give up without a struggle. The "San Diego" had been anchored off Fisherman's Cove, a little more than a mile north of Laguna Beach. I was determined to see for myself if they had departed. I lost no time starting and ran all the way to the landing place. Before I reached Santa Ana Camp, I saw the ship still lying at anchor. I hastened my pace and arrived at the

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Cove just as the last boat was being pushed off. It was a boat load of wood for the ship's galley. I jumped in and we were soon alongside the schooner.

A westerly wind had been blowing all afternoon and a very high sea was running. It was just sundown. My first task was to unload the boat of wood. The sea was so rough that sometimes the yawl would be almost even with the deck, at others nearly under the ship. It was very difficult to unload the wood from the tossing boat. Sometimes we would overthrow and sometimes the wood would hit the ship's side and bounce back in the boat.

As soon as we got the wood unloaded the Captain gave orders to heave the anchor. He expected to put to sea before the wind lay, as it was sure to do during the night. He hoped to be well on the way to the Island before morning.

The party consisted of the following passengers: George Insley, who at that time was marshall of Santa Ana; A. J. Waterhouse, then editor of the Santa Ana Daily Blade; Mr. Roush, a correspondent of the New York Herald; Mr. Knight, an artist; Mr. Ludlow, Mr. Dungan, William Cheetham, my father, Arthur Cheetham, my brother, Billy Sexton and Charley Reed. The crew consisted of Captain Peterson, Wally Peterson, his nephew and myself.

As the Captain had ordered we heaved the anchor, hoisted the sails and the ship got under way. About that time I began to feel the effects of my visit to Santa Ana. I had made the trip with a boy chum, who was running a fruit and pop stand at Laguna Beach, to Santa Ana to get a load of fruit and soda water. We had partaken freely of both on our return. Consequently I went on board that evening with an overloaded stomach. We had no sooner weighed anchor when I began to feel the burden of my gluttony. I hastened to the stern and began to feed a multitude of fishes.

Some of the passengers said, "Put the kid ashore, he is sick already and will be no good for the rest of the journey." But the old captain came to rescue. He said, "The kid will be all right in a few minutes." Fortunately for me, the Captain's prophecy came true. I was sick only a few minutes and was not sick again throughout the trip.

We pushed out to sea about half a mile when the wind slacked

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and soon left us becalmed. The high sea that was running soon pushed us back into the kelp. The Captain ordered a boat lowered and soundings made all around the yacht. It appearing that we were in about thirty fathoms of water, he ordered us to let go the anchor. By this time it was dark. A lantern was lighted and suspended in the rigging. The port and starboard light were also put in place. We soon turned in for the night. I made down my bunk on a settee in the cabin at the left of the companionway. As I was tired, I was soon fast asleep.

About midnight I was awakened by an excited conversation on deck. I recognized the voices of Captain Peterson and Joe Shelani, a fisherman. The latter had seen our rigging lights and had come out from shore to warn us of the danger we were in. He was very much excited and in broken English told the captain that we were right up against a big rock, that a hole would be driven in our side before morning. It was amusing to hear the conversation between the Portuguese fisherman and the Swedish sea captain. Both spoke more or less broken English. The captain told the fisherman that he knew where he was and that he had made soundings all around; that the danger was all imaginary. He said that we had left a keg of pickles on shore by mistake, and that if he wanted to do us a favor, to go back and get the keg and bring it out to us; that they were more important to us than anything else at that time.

I was soon asleep again and did not awaken until daylight. When I went on deck, I was the first to arise. I found Captain Peterson sitting on the wheelhouse. He said to me, "Just look there!" And pointed in three directions to where the rocks were showing. It was then low tide. He told me to call the mate. When Wally came on deck we lowered a boat, heaved up the anchor and towed the ship out of the pocket that we seemed to be in.

There was a very slight land breeze. We hoisted sail and stood off probably a mile from shore. The wind soon died down and left us again becalmed. We did not get a breeze again until about noon. As there is a current down the coast we drifted slowly down, immediately off Laguna Beach. We remained all forenoon in sight of our camp.

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About eleven o'clock our good friend Joe Shelani and another fisherman named Jones, came out with the keg of pickles, for which we expressed great gratitude and gave them a few pieces of silver. Soon after this the westerly wind arose and we were not long in getting out of sight of the surf. The captain had, previous to sailing, laid down his course on his chart. So when we got steerageway, he put the ship on its proper course. The wind soon became fresh and grew stronger as the day wore on.

About three o'clock in the afternoon, Charley Reed had his straw hat knocked overboard while we were tacking from the port to starboard tack. The captain hauled the ship around in a circle, ran alongside, and the hat was picked up with a boat-hook.

We kept a westerly course, running about as close to the wind as the ship would stand, and made about eight knots an hour until nightfall. At sundown we were directly south of the lower end of the Island of Catalina, perhaps twenty miles from its south end. At sundown we lighted our port and starboard lights and displayed our rigging light. Just before dark we sighted a steamer heading across our bow off the port quarter. She crossed about a mile ahead of us and hove to, running alongside on our windward. She proved to be the freight steamer "Emily." The captain was on the bridge and he spoke to our captain with a megaphone. He asked our captain if we wished a tow to Catalina, but Captain Peterson replied that we were bound for San Clemente. They soon passed on and disappeared in the darkness, while we kept on our course.

After supper the men gathered around the cockpit and exchanged yarns. There were many phosphorescent jelly fish in this particular part of the sea, which made a spectacular sight. In the wake of the vessel many lights could be seen. As we passed on the new moon disappeared, leaving nothing but the light of the stars. About ten o'clock the men all retired to their bunks in the cabin. The captain and the mate took turns on deck.

About three o'clock next morning the captain called down the companionway for me to come on deck. I instantly arose and ran up the steps. I did not know that he was in the act of shifting from port to starboard tack. I had no sooner stepped on deck when the

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main boom hit me on the head and nearly swept me overboard. Just then I heard two of our passengers, who had been seasick all night and were sitting on deck, call out to the captain that the ship was about to hit a big rock. The captain, in language well known to seafaring men, informed them that the large black object that excited their fears was not a rock but a whale. It had come up alongside to spout and possibly to see what sort of an object we were.

I ran forward and adjusted the foresail and jib and we were soon on the starboard tack, running northward parallel to the Island of San Clemente. I stayed on deck until daylight, when the outline of the island emerged from the darkness on the portside. It seemed but a very short distance to shore. Soon after daylight the wind laid and we were left becalmed.

As soon as it got light enough to see well, we seemed to be in the midst of a school of whales. They were spouting in every direction. Some two or three would be visible at one time. Some came up very close to us. When the men came on deck, some of them went below for their Winchesters and began shooting at the whales. One big fellow came up right under our bow and the men rushed forward to shoot, but the captain stopped them. He told them that a whale would not feel their bullets as much as a dog would a flea, but that if one in that position got frightened, he might take a somersault and carry away our bowsprit. The whales kept up their spouting until about nine o'clock.

About that time we picked up a breeze and headed about for the south end of the island. When we were just about opposite that end the captain decided to lower a boat and go ashore to make soundings for a landing. His chart showed an anchorage at that point.

When he agreed to take the party to the island, he informed them that he had never known a sea captain who had effected a landing and he would not make any definite promise to land this party, but would do his best. The boat was lowered and George Insley and my brother Arthur accompanied him. They rowed to the site shown on the chart as an anchorage, made several soundings and landed the boat on shore. While they were on the beach a big breaker rolled in and as the water piled up just prior to breaking, they saw three



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big man-eating sharks close to shore. As soon as the breakers subsided, the captain turned to his companions and said, "Let's get out of here, this is no place to land."

About this time we picked up a fresh breeze and Wally put the boat for San Diego, intending soon to haul around on the other tack and pick up the captain's party. The captain thought we were playing a trick on him and was furious when he came on deck. He used quite an extensive flow of seafaring language not intended to embellish a Sunday School weekly. As soon as he boarded he put the ship up the channel again, toward the northern end of the island.

About ten or eleven o'clock the wind again quit us and left us becalmed. After we had dinner I decided to go swimming, and as there were no ladies on board, I stripped off and jumped overboard. The men got to throwing nickels and cartridge shells over for me to dive and get. Some of the others of the party decided to go in as the water appeared to be fine. We were having a little swimming party when the newspaper man from New York called out, "A shark is coming!" We thought that he was trying to have a little fun at our expense and paid no attention. But the mate was at the wheel and in a minute he assured us that a real shark was headed our way. We all got on board somehow, although none could tell just how he did it. The shark swam close by with his dorsal fin sticking up out of the water. Immediately a piece of bacon was cut and put on a hook and cast overboard in front of him, but he wasn't after bacon. He turned off and passed out of sight.

The westerly wind rose late that day, but when it came we headed up the east coast of the island. We were able to hold a course parallel with the shore line and saw many things of interest during the afternoon. There were whales, schools of porpoises, flying fish and even a sword fish, the first the captain had seen in Pacific waters up to that time.

As night came on my brother hooked an albacore, a fish resembling a tuna. It weighed about thirty pounds. After supper the men congregated in the cockpit to exchange yarns again and to see who was the most skillful prevaricator.

About the time the moon went down a flying fish struck the main-



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sail and fell on deck. He was immediately pounced upon by the captain who declared it the best tasted fish that swims the sea. He told Wally to have it in the frying pan for his breakfast.

We stood along the east side of the island all night. The captain, Wally and I took turns on deck. When morning came we were about midway between the north end of San Clemente and the south end of Catalina.

There seemed to be a current flowing south and by noon we had drifted in that direction several miles. Along about that time we again got the westerly wind and then headed for the anchorage, some distance south of the north end of the island.

For a youngster of my years, it would not have been surprising that one would think and even talk about such adventurers as Robinson Crusoe. But the men indulged in such thoughts and talked much of a character such as Defoe has made immortal. We had no knowledge of anyone ever having lived on the island. Nor did we expect it to be a treasure island. But the men did often say, "What if we find a Robinson Crusoe?"

As we came in sight of the landing someone who had been looking through a powerful glass called out, "There is a cabin on shore!" This was news to us and there was a scramble for field glasses. Sure enough, on taking up a glass we could plainly see a cabin immediately south of the cove for which we were headed. Then the Robinson Crusoe talk was revived and all wondered who it might be that had been shipwrecked on this island.

This cove is about four miles south of the north end, on the east side of the island. I believe it is now known as Gallagher's Cove. It was shown as an anchorage on the Captain's chart. So he headed right in, hoping to make a landing. The wind was a westerly wind and we were therefore on the leaside of the land. The captain judged from his experiences at Catalina that he would have to drift in under the momentum of the ship. For at that place he always found himself out of wind before reaching water shallow enough in which to anchor. He therefore ordered us to lower all sails except the main-sail and jib. We were sailing about eight points off of the wind, and we fully expected the wind to lay as we neared the shore. We un-

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lashed the starboard anchor to which was fastened a heavy chain. I stood in the forecastle near the anchor and Wally was well forward on the windward side, with a lead line in his hand.

When we got fairly close to the shore the Captain called to Wally to sound for bottom. The lead line spun out over the side and the mate called back "no bottom." He hauled in the line and made a second sounding with the same result.

We were getting uncomfortably close by this time. As we were on the port tack, it would be necessary, in case we found no bottom, to luff the mainsail against the wind which was blowing stronger every minute. In fact it seemed to pour through a low place on the island like a funnel. The Captain called to some of the men in the cockpit to let go the main sheet. This was necessary to enable the ship to ease off to the leeward. The men being landlubbers mistook his order and turned the main halyards loose. The gaff boom at once lapped over the main stay and could not be gotten up or down. The captain threw the wheel to port but the ship would not mind the helm. We were heading straight for the rocks and by this time it was only a stone's throw. The wind was getting stronger and the rocky point was now on our lea. The men were getting excited for shipwreck seemed inevitable. One man, Mr. Ludlow, had carried up his suitcase and gun and was ready to jump as soon as she struck the rocks.

The captain jumped from the wheel and let go the main sheet. This let the mainsail swing around out of the wind. Meantime we had turned loose the jib. The captain threw the wheel to port again but soon saw that we could not heave to in time to miss the rocks. He therefore yelled to Wally to let go the anchor. I was nearest to it and lost no time in pushing it off. The chain went racing through the hawse pipe. Wally grabbed a belaying pin and ran into the hawse and stopped the escape of the chain. We were within a half a length from shore.

The ship came to a stand in eighteen feet of water. She drew fourteen. But no time could be lost for she was bound to swing around on the rocks. Wally told me to unlash the port anchor while he and my brother lowered a yawl. We dropped the second anchor

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into the boat and they hurried out into the cove and cast it into the sea. All hands were called to the capstan and the ship was hauled back off from the rocks. When the wind lay that night we towed her out to a safer distance, where we anchored in about twenty fathoms of water.

After our excitement was over and the shock of a close call had subsided, we looked towards the shore and saw a man standing in front of the cabin. We learned afterwards that his name was Gallagher. He had expected to see us land on the rocks and had come out in front of his cabin to see the crash. Some of the men went ashore to see him and find out how he came to be there. They learned that he had lived there many years. As to the cause of his being a hermit, they were not able to ascertain anything. He was a man of intelligence. The first thing he asked for was for books and magazines. But he was very reticent concerning his own life. In fact he refused to give any information touching his past.

We soon learned that the island contained about twenty thousand head of sheep, which belonged to a firm in Los Angeles. That it was their custom to send a ship over once a year with men to corral and shear the sheep. That no other vessel had ever visited the island up to that time. In fact, Gallagher said that we were the first pleasure party that he had ever seen visiting San Clemente.

My brother who was a good marksman, asked Mr. Gallagher if he might go out and kill a sheep, as we were getting hungry for some fresh meat. The old man said that he, himself, had no firearms, and would enjoy a mess of mutton himself. That he would be glad to have my brother kill a sheep or two. So Arthur and Billy Sexton took their Winchesters and started out. They found the sheep as wild as deer, but picked off a couple of fat lambs and were back in a short time, each with a saddle. One of these they gave to Gallagher. The other they brought on shipboard. It was the best mutton I ever tasted, very fat and sweet, and as we had been living on fish and canned goods, we surely relished some fresh meat.

My first job after the ship was safely anchored, out in cove, was to scrub deck. I thought the captain was a little particular, for there had not been any dust on deck since we left Laguna. But the deck

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had to be scrubbed and I got busy to do the job. I had not expected to go ashore that day, but after I had finished the scrubbing, coiled the halyard ropes and otherwise put everything shipshape, the captain told me to take the round-bottomed yawl and go where I pleased. This he had refused to let the men take. We had a flat-bottomed boat which he let them use.

I took the round-bottomed yawl and went out on an exploring expedition along the east side of the island to the northward. I rowed about four miles, till I reached the north point of the island. On the way I found some caverns which had been made by the action of the waves. These I explored. I returned to the ship about supper time, and as I had had a strenuous day, retired early.

The next morning the captain told me that I had shore leave all day. I went ashore early with the men. They scattered in all directions. I went westward across the island. I saw many sheep which took to the brush and rocks as soon as they saw me. I also saw two or three little gray foxes. On arriving at the water's edge, I found the whole coast line, except where a rocky point jutted out, to be a sandy beach. This was the result of the pounding of the waves for countless ages. We had found the east coast to be lined with boulders ranging from six inches to two feet in diameter, much coarser than the gravel at Avalon.

I turned back to the ridge and from there headed northward for some distance. Just a short distance east of the main ridge I came upon the ruins of an Indian village. It was the most weird sight I had ever seen. I could then imagine how Robinson Crusoe felt when he first saw human tracks in the sand, and the campfires the cannibals had left. There weren't any tracks here. They had long since been obliterated by the winds and the storms. But I saw lying there on the sand more than a score of human skeletons. There were also numerous mortars, pestles and other implements of the stone age. Bones were scattered here and there. I stood there wondering if some great famine had overtaken these unfortunate people. Had they died of smallpox, cholera or from starvation? My mind was carried back into the mystery of the past. I suppose I had been influenced by Defoe's story. Had the implements of the stone man not been present, I would have believed that two desperate bands

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of pirates had met there and fought for the possession of rich loot and treasures, buried somewhere beneath the sands. But I knew that the beings that once animated those bones were Indians. I thought of cannibals and of the horrors of cannibal warfare. My imagination ran wild thinking of the evils that must have befallen those unfortunate people.

After contemplating the uncanny scene for a time, I pushed on towards the north end of the island. Near the north point was a petrified forest. Here it again looked as if fate had wrought havoc and made San Clemente a place of desolation. I then turned southward, passing down along the east shore, much of which I had seen the day before from the boat.

The day by this time being pretty well spent, I returned to the ship. I was glad to be able to sleep on board, for I thought it safer than on the island. I was not afraid of shipwrecks, nor anything of that sort. But the weird scene, near the top of the ridge, where a whole village of people had perished, gave me the shudders. I have since learned that many of the Indians were slain by the Russian seal hunters, and that they probably did not die of famine, but were killed in pitched battle. That the men who slew them bore firearms. That the remainder of the tribe constructed canoes and made their escape across the channel to Catalina and from thence to the mainland. It was indeed interesting just a few years ago to visit the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles and see the relics preserved in the San Clemente Room, recovered from that island. Some of these I probably saw as they lay bleaching in the sand.

That night the men decided that next day we would weigh anchor and sail for Catalina. They had seen enough of the weird and wanted a little touch of high life. It was open season at Avalon, the principal resort on that island. So it was agreed that as soon as breakfast was over we would heave anchor.

The boat lay in from fifteen to twenty fathoms of water, depending on which way she was headed. The water was so clear that we could often see bottom. The sea at this place abounded in multitudes of fish of different species. Anybody who was thus inclined could catch an abundance.

One of the laughable incidents of our last morning at Gallagher's

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Cove was on our artist friend, Mr. Knight. While the cook was preparing breakfast, he tried his hand at fishing. He dropped his line overboard and soon hooked what he thought was a big one. He pulled away hard. The fish carried the line under the ship. He had quite a struggle, but finally got the object of his endeavors to the surface. When it reached the top he was pulling so hard that it almost flew on deck. It proved to be the most vicious fish I ever saw. It was only about a foot long and was of a variety that the captain called a sculpin or scorpion fish. I was a strong believer in the captain and of course adopted his nomenclature, for all the birds and fish that we saw inhabiting the sea. He said that this fish was dangerous to handle, for every horn, of which it had many, was very poisonous. I recalled that our good friend Joe Shelani, the fisherman, had once caught one while fishing in the kelp with a row boat. He nearly chopped a hole in the boat in his effort to rid himself of his unwelcome catch.

After breakfast we had a slight wind, so we weighed anchor and put to sea. We headed for the south end of the island of Catalina. The wind carried us two or three miles and left us becalmed. While we were lying in the offing, with the reef points flapping against the sails, we viewed nearby a fierce battle between two monsters of the deep. The captain said it was a fight between a thrasher and a whale. At any rate they lashed the water into a foam. It must have been a terrific struggle, from the way they made the water fly.

In due time we got our westerly wind and were soon sailing along toward the south bluffs of Catalina. We arrived off that point not far from sundown. It is about four miles from the south end to the resort of Avalon. We had hoped to sail in under the headway that we already had. But as soon as we ran in the lee of the island the wind quit us and left us becalmed. Red blood soon asserted itself. The younger men of the party were determined to make port that night. So they proposed to tow the vessel in with the long boat rather than to stay out there. The boat was accordingly lowered and the ship taken in tow. By dark we were safely anchored in the little cove at Avalon.

The moon by this time was past the quarter. After supper was

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over the ship swung around with the stern toward shore. A dance was in progress in the ballroom of the old hotel Metropole. Numerous pleasure craft were lying at anchor. The names of some have passed from my memory. But I recall that the "Ariel" lay alongside on our starboard, the "La Bonita" on our port. "La Paloma" lay at anchor over near the Sugar Loaf.

I shall never forget an observation of our editor, Mr. Waterhouse, as we sat in the cockpit that night. The music of the Metropole orchestra was resounding across the waters. He said, "Men, this is just as near heaven as I ever expect to get." After listening to the music a few hours we retired.

The next day I had to go through the routine of scrubbing deck and seeing that all the halyards were properly coiled. There was a good spring of pure water on the island, just up the gulch from the hotel. The captain decided to fill his tanks. So we had the job of taking water, which took up quite a bit of time. But after the work was all done the captain said, "Now boy, you have shore leave for the rest of the day."

The first thing I did was to go below and get into my bathing suit. It was my intention to swim ashore. I jumped overboard. The captain saw me alongside and asked me if I wouldn't dive down and see how much the ship's centerboard projected below the keel. I dived down and as the water was clear, opened my eyes while under the side of the vessel. I came up and told the Captain that it was down about a foot and a half. He said that it was more than that. I immediately turned down again and swam to where I could measure the centerboard with my arm. It proved to be about three feet. As it was just as near, I went on under and came up on the opposite side. The captain began to think I had been down too long, as he was looking over the side from which I had dived. He called out to the mate and said, "The boy is drowning. He went down and hasn't come back." I immediately answered him from the opposite side. He came running across the deck with a look of surprise on his face. He said, "What, boy, you didn't dive clear under?" I said, "Yes I did, Captain, your centerboard is down about three feet."

I climbed on board and was standing on the taffrail, near the



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davits, when Mr. Roush came swimming from the "Hardware on Ice." In those days the Bannings did not allow intoxicating liquors to be sold on the island. Some enterprising fellow had a barge anchored in the cove, about midway between the Sugar Loaf and the hotel. On it he displayed this sign, "Hardware on Ice, Boats to let, Etc." The "Etc." was the biggest item of his trade. For he kept a stock of hard liquors, for barter and sale.

Mr. Roush had gone over there to get a drink of the "Etc." and swam back to the "San Diego." He came alongside just at this time. The Captain said to him, "The boy just dived under the ship." Roush made a very derogatory remark about the "boy" and swam up to one of the davit hooks in order to swing himself aboard. A choppy sea was running from the southwest that morning. The ship was rolling considerably. Just as he swam up to the davits, the ship gave a sudden lurch. The davit hook caught him under the chin and before he could catch it with his hands it jerked him nearly out of the water. Of course, the "boy" laughed, for he had been surly and cross with me throughout the entire trip. He swung himself aboard and made a dive for me. I jumped overboard and escaped his clutch.

I then swam across the cove to where the "La Paloma" was lying. "La Paloma" was the private yacht of the Bannings. She was a sloop-rigged vessel and considered very fast. The Bannings were the owners of Catalina at that time. The crew threw a line over the side, which was an invitation to board their boat. I did so and had a nice visit with those on board at the time. I had an enjoyable time.

I had visited Catalina before on the same yacht, "San Diego." After dinner I took the ship's yawl and went ashore, as I knew some people there. Later I went down the coast towards the south end and visited some fishermen who were fishing for sea bass and Jew fish.

I returned to the "San Diego" in time for supper, after which we spent another enjoyable evening on shipboard. The next morning we weighed anchor and sailed for home. On the way over I hooked and landed a shark about four feet long. Before sundown we were safely landed at Fisherman's Cove.